"Poverty" and the Politics of Syncopation

Urban Examples from Kinshasa (DR Congo)

by Filip De Boeck

By means of an ethnographic "urban acupuncture" of a specific building within the city of Kinshasa, this article explores how poverty effects emerging publics in the city. Poverty "rhythms" city life in specific ways, and these rhythms may be best understood in terms of a politics of the syncopated and the suspended through which urban publics are constantly splintered and reassembled. The suspensions and missed beats that thus punctuate urban daily living often produce violence, closure, and isolation, but simultaneously they also generate unexpected accents that form openings into the "something else" of the offbeat track, thereby hinting at the (always vulnerable and equally problematic) possibility of alternative collective action and the ad hoc creation of new groups, publics, and public spaces.

Rhythms of Poverty: Of Syncopation and Suspension

Syncopation, a musical effect caused by a syncope, missed beat or off-the-beat stress (also referred to as *suspension*).

Syncope: In phonology, *syncope* (Greek: *syn-* + *koptein* "to strike, cut off") is the loss of one or more sounds from the interior of a word, especially the loss of an unstressed vowel. A loss of sounds from the end of a word is an *apocope* (from *apo-*, meaning "away from" and *koptein*, meaning "to cut").

Syncope is also the medical term for fainting, and is defined as a transient loss of consciousness and postural tone.

Teka masanga na yo!
Soki olandi mibela ya lelo,
Oya koteka liputa ya chinois!
Teka, teka, teka!
Mibali ya lelo basalaka te.
Soki olandi bango,
Okoya kobamba liputa ya chinois!
Teka, teka teka nguba na yo!
Mibali ya lelo basalaka te.
Soki olandi bango,
Okoya kozanga elamba ya kolata!

Sell your corn,
If you follow today's husbands,
You risk selling your Chinese loincloth![1]
Sell, sell, sell!
Today's husbands don't have a job,
And if you follow them,
You risk wearing a used and repaired Chinese loincloth!
Sell, sell, sell your groundnuts!
Today's husbands have no work
And if you follow them you won't have a loincloth to wear at all! (Popular song among Kinshasa market women)

"Sell, sell, sell!" But who has money to buy anything? In Kinshasa, *nzombo le soir* (the evening *nzombo*) is the name given to a specific buying strategy on the market. In the late evening, just before the market's closure, unsold perishable food stuffs such as *nzombo*, a specific kind of freshwater fish (*Protopterus*, or African lungfish), are being sold at a reduced price by women known as *bamama bitula*. Many customers wait for that ultimate but very brief window of opportunity to buy something affordable for their families to eat that night. More generally, *nzombo le soir* has become a standing expression to denote an unexpected opportunity or windfall within an overall condition of lack and want. For many, though, for lack of pecuniary means, even survival tactics such as *nzombo le soir* cannot be pursued on a daily basis.

As in multiple other urban settings across the global south (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2013), the extremely low income level of most urban residents in Congo imposes a specific frame that deeply affects the rhythms of daily life. It also modifies the very language that urban dwellers use to make sense of this life. To stick to the market example, when people go to the market in search of chicken meat, they no longer buy *nsoso* (the common word for chicken in Lingala, the Congolese capital's lingua franca), but they buy *nso* instead. *Nso* has become the common term to refer to the minuscule portions of chicken skin that most of Kinshasa's inhabitants can still afford. Not

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1. "Chinese" means a cheap textile of poor quality.

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that chickens themselves have become scarce. Rather, it is again because most people lack the amount of money necessary to buy a sizeable portion of chicken meat that the apocope *nso*, as an evocation of the concept of chicken and a reminder of its flavor and scent, has come to replace the materiality of the "real thing." What does this verbal amputation mean in a city where speech is so important as a strategy of self-making and where one has to fully master the art of rhetorics and know "ce que parler veut dire" (Bourdieu 1982) in order to survive, to exist socially, and to become someone with social "weight" (*mwana ya kilo*)? What kind of crisis underlies the fact that even language, the very tool of individual self-making and collective realization, is syncopated, and the words of this urbanspeak are rationed or have to be cut in half in order to adapt to the reduced possibilities that mark the quality of social life for most in the Central African urban site?

Poverty, as we know, does precisely that: it modifies the rhythm of life and language. It syncopates the temporality of one's day (hence *nzombo le soir*) by constantly generating time- and energy-consuming deviations and suspensions and thereby limiting and reducing one's options on all immediate practical levels of everyday life. Similarly, poverty also reduces or "cuts away from" the capacity of one's language to reveal, demystify, clarify, or explain the unsteady ground of one's life, a life that seems to be formatted by conditions that are increasingly dictated by fate or by miracle. Indeed, heavily borrowing from the vocabularies of the Neo-Pentecostal churches that have permeated the city's public sphere, "miraculous" has become an important term and one of the main structuring devices of people's lives. It is not as if the violence of poverty fully diminishes one's power to reflect or to speak. Rather, it creates its own vocabularies and verbal regimes. Often it changes the very form of words while also modifying the capacity to order these urban vocabularies into comprehensible syntaxes. Often, also, it generates a verbal diarrhea, a swelling army of words, of little soldiers, that people deploy to confront and fight the chaos of their daily existence or to overcome and rearrange that chaos into an alternative order. Despite the wit and humor that is often involved in these verbal and grammatical skirmishes with an overwhelming reality, these attempts to attenuate its violence frequently remain futile. In this way, urban living is constantly punctuated by a semantic overproduction, an "overheating" of meaning, a veritable "speaking in tongues" that, in the end, renders the world even more complex. And through this excess of regularly incomprehensible and always strangely coded messages, through the often meaningless shouts that are constantly produced by the *atalaku* (the popular animators of Kinshasa's orchestras; cf. White 2008:59) and that strongly determine the quality of the city's acoustic scape, through the miraculous glossolalia that are produced in the city's countless prayer meetings or through the words and messages scribbled or painted on every car and every wall of the city, it is as if this overproduction of words diminishes even more one's own agency or capacity to read meaning into the urban site, to understand the rules that govern life beyond the immediate surface of its chaotic appearance, or to give that life a purpose and finality other than mere survival.

To meander successfully through all of the contradictions, the impossible possibilities, and the changes of pace and rhythm that urban life constantly generates, to calculate one's chances and to know when to cut one's losses, demands a quality of judgment and a capacity to multitask that Kinois (Kinshasa's inhabitants) commonly refer to as *matematik* (mathematics). And indeed, to steer the course of your life unharmed through all the pitfalls, all the possible and constantly changing parameters of your daily existence, or to successfully network and simultaneously connect and insert yourself into as many collectivities as possible, seems to demand an advanced knowledge of higher mathematics and of topics such as chaos, fractals, and mobility or a profound understanding of vectorial capacity and the dynamics of (social) transmission. The constant networking and branching out (locally referred to as *branchement*)[2] that the city requires of people to survive in it, the fact also that one constantly, and often within a fraction of a second, has to decide whether or not to grab an opportunity or to connect or insert oneself or not, frequently drives the urban dweller to the brink of insanity. It is no coincidence that a mentally disturbed person is said to be *na ba-réseaux* (she is with [too many] networks [in her head]), like the cell phones with several SIM cards that people use to be able to switch between different providers. But madness is also the very opposite of this: it may result from the fact that one's "network is cut off" (*réseau ekimi*), that one does not know how to connect and therefore becomes too isolated to survive in the city.

In this article, and by means of an ethnographic "urban acupuncture" of a specific site within the city, I want to further explore the rhythms of the syncopated, the excessive, and the suspended in relation to the emergence of new publics in the city. How do these rhythms influence people's *branchements*, their (in)capacity to plug in and connect? And how does this contribute to the creation of various publics and the (im)possibility of a shared urban public sphere? What kinds of openings and closures, potentialities and violences does it generate? How, in short, does poverty effect emerging publics in relation to the city? As we know from Amartya Sen's social choice theory, poverty, as a rhythm of syncopation, often constitutes a cutting off, a reduction of the alternatives available for choice, and therefore it regularly leads to "a life within limits" (Jackson 2011) and to deviations and transient or more permanent blockages and losses (of time, of energy, of the capacity to express oneself, and above all of social possibilities and associative life, of living and living together in the city).

2. *Faire le branchement* (to connect) is also used to refer to acts of "corruption": e.g., a student looks for a *branchement*, a connection with a teacher in order to buy his diploma. As such a *branchement* is also a more illicit version of what Kinois describe as a *coop*, a deal or bargain (*coop* as in "cooperation"; Nzeza Bilakila 2004). The illicit, corrupt, and therefore more hidden and invisible version of such a bargain is also referred as *s(h)ida*, after the French acronym for AIDS, the "invisible" disease.

However, the suspensions and missed beats, generated by the syncopal and staccato rhythms of the mental and material lines that people's lives are forced to describe in the urban terrain, simultaneously also generate new and often unexpected accents that form openings into the "something else" of the offbeat track and hint at the possible suturing cuts and ruptures and the possibility of alternative encounters and new collective actions and hence the creation of new groups, publics, and public spaces. But before further exploring the specific (and often potentially violent) microprocesses of these alternative socialities, let me say something about the notion of the "urban poor" in the context of Kinshasa first.

The "Urban Poor"

To talk about the "urban poor" as a general denominator of a specific social class within the city of Kinshasa does not clarify a lot. First, in Congo the notion of "class" in itself has never been a major organizational principle. Second, for a long time, urban poverty was an almost nonexisting category. There are many historical reasons for both. Under Belgian colonial rule, for example, structural poverty was (officially) absent in urban centers such as Léopoldville. It was not as if the (often forcefully recruited) Congolese labor force that constituted the bulk of the urban population did not suffer any privation in the camps and quarters in which they were housed, nor was it the case that there were no unemployed, but the real wages of unskilled laborers were rather high, and the colonial authorities only allowed Congolese into the city if they had a job. Unemployed city dwellers were deported back to the countryside.

In the 1960 crisis that followed the country's independence, unemployment rose to 52% (Iliffe 1987: 169ff.; see also La Fontaine 1970). To some extent, however, the 1960 crisis was conjunctural rather than structural, and between 1960 and the early 1970s, Kinshasa went through a period of relative prosperity even though its population more than doubled (from 400,000 in 1960 to 1 million in 1970). But in spite of this demographic growth, many continued to find employment as manual laborers while at the same time a lot of urban residents accessed new labor markets from which they had previously been barred under colonial rule. In this way, for example, an important number of people were drawn into the state apparatus as civil servants while others became teachers, doctors, lawyers, and so on, or entered the world of commerce and trade, especially after Mobutu's "Zairianisation," a large-scale nationalization of the private and commercial sector that, up till 1973, had continued to be in Belgian hands or had been outsourced to other groups, most notably Greek and Portuguese. The latter constituted an important fraction of the colony's commercial middle class, both in the colony's capital and its provincial towns. Many of these *commerçants* continued their businesses after independence until they were dispossessed of their shops and enterprises by the Mobutist state.

Although the Zairianisation aimed at creating an autochthonous commercial middle class of shop owners, traders, and businessmen, it actually produced the opposite effect. A total economic debacle, it inaugurated the beginning of an economic and political crisis the country still has not recovered from. And rather than creating a local middle class (a role played by Portuguese, Greeks, and Belgians until the 1970s, by Lebanese and Pakistanis in the 1980s, and by Chinese more recently), it generated the start of a process of generalized pauperization that touched both the city's manual labor force as well as its new army of white-collar workers. The latter had started to work for the postindependence state administration in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but as the economic crisis became more pronounced by the early 1980s, they did not have the time to consolidate their new status and solidify as a new upper middle class. In the beginning of the 1990s, inflation rates started to reach 8,000% on a yearly basis, and the two waves of looting that subsequently swept through the city of Kinshasa and the country as a whole (in 1991 and 1993) further killed off whatever was still left of the national economic infrastructure and activity (Devisch 1995).

Toward the mid-1990s, only 5%–10% of Kinshasa's population was estimated to participate in the formal economy, a situation that condemned everybody else to the "informal" survival strategies and the small-scale corruption that became famous as *madesu ya bana* (beans for the children), *kobeta libanga* (breaking stones), "article 15" (an imaginary article of the Zairean Civil Code: "*débrouillez-vous*!" [you sort it out!]), or to a diasporic existence. The vast majority of Kinois for whom such an outward-bound trajectory was and is no option continues its survival struggle on less than US$2 a day,[3] and most monetary indicators of well-being and poverty indicate a continuing downward leveling of different regions of the capital city (De Herdt and Marivoet 2011). q3

An Urban Acupuncture: "The Building" of Masina Sans Fil

In such a context of "precariat" (Standing 2011) from which only a very small but unsteady political and economical elite manages to escape (Freund 2009), the "urban poor" as a concept to designate a separate social class loses most of its explanatory strength because it basically encompasses the majority of the city's inhabitants. Here the notion of "poverty" itself comes to mean something totally different.

A place where these histories of continued decline materialize is the site Cielux Office Congolais de Poste et Télécommunication (OCPT), colloquially known as "the Building" (*le bâtiment*; fig. 1). The Building is located in the neighborhood of Sans Fil (Wireless), a neighborhood of the populous municipality of Masina, itself part of Tshangu, the riverine district that extends east of the colonial heart of the city. q4

3. 2012 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, U.S. Department of State.

Figure 1. "The Building" and adjacent stores and stalls (Masina Sans Fil, March 2013). Photo used by permission of Sammy Baloji.

The Cielux site was constructed in the mid 1950s as one of many *succurcales* of the major post office in the central downtown municipality of Gombe. At the time of its construction, it was located outside of the city. A grand modernist L-shaped building, it housed a section of the national radio, and it functioned as an outgoing relay station for international telephone and telegraph communications (hence the name "Wireless," which is used to refer to the neighborhood as a whole). It thus literally connected Kinshasa to the outside world. Situated in a huge walled compound and connected to Kinshasa's main road, the Boulevard Lumumba (the N1, which connects the airport to the downtown Gombe area), by the neighborhood's only asphalt road, the Avenue Matankumu, it remained relatively isolated even when the rest of Masina rapidly developed as an illegally occupied *zone annexe* of the municipality of Ndjili, one of the last municipalities to be developed by the Belgian urban planners before independence (Fumunzanza 2008:54). In 1968, people's auto-occupation of Masina as an annex zone to more planned and officially recognized neighborhoods was formalized when Masina itself was elevated to the status of municipality (Fumunzanza 2008:227). From then on, it quickly developed into a *Chine populaire*, the "People's Republic of China," as it is nicknamed today because of its extreme population density (estimated at 50,000 inhabitants per km^2).[4]

In the beginning, the peripheral squatter areas of Masina mainly attracted (unemployed) workers from other, more populous neighborhoods of the city. Quickly they were joined by newcomers from Kinshasa's adjacent rural areas.

Untouched by this swelling tide of new urban inhabitants and their improvised dwellings, the area of Masina Sans Fil, as it was surrounded by a long wall that protected the Building and the land around it against intruders, remained virginally empty till the early 1980s. But then the OCPT gave in to the mounting pressures of the personnel it employed in the Building, and it finished by opening up a small part of the site, in order to parcel out a number of lots for its employees to compensate for all the years the latter had not, or only very partially, been paid. Inevitably, however, once the wall was breached, and even though the site officially continued to belong to the OCPT, it did not take long for other actors (often with a very good *branchement*, such as politicians, or members of the na-

4. In 1984, Masina's total population was estimated at 162,000. In 2004, it had risen to nearly 600,000 (Fumumzanza 2008:62), and it surpasses 1 million inhabitants today.

tional secret service) to move in as well. Before long, the whole site was invaded: with surprising speed, the once pristine bush of the OCPT land was turned into a chaotic puzzle of parcels without much intervention by the city's cadastral services or without even the semblance of an urban zoning plan.

After this first wave of random occupation and land grabbing, a number of businessmen and lawyers started to buy parcels and houses from the OCPT employees who had been the first to receive a plot. Diamond traders who made a quick fortune in the Kasai or in the Angolan diamond fields of Lunda Norte in the late 1980s and early 1990s and other people who could afford it started to move in, "gentrifying" Sans Fil in the process.

But while the inhabitants of the Sans Fil neighborhood originally constituted more of a middle class than the rural migrants who occupied other parts of Masina, and while the houses they constructed were often far more spacious and luxurious, their fortunes were often very short lived. Today, little distinguishes this area from the rest of the municipality, or most of the city, in infrastructural or material terms. Dating back to colonial times, the asphalt of the Avenue Matankumu has by now almost completely disappeared. Most streets are covered with layers of dirt and mud, and the hasty and chaotic occupation of the area has left deep traces: often the streets are too small for a car to pass, many streets end in culs-de-sac, and because no basic infrastructure was implemented before the area was occupied, the wastewater of most compounds is evacuated into the street, turning most streets into open sewers and creating large potholes that further deepen during Kinshasa's rainy season and make car access to the neighborhood increasingly difficult. And because of a continuing densification of space, Sans Fil is rapidly becoming as overpopulated as the rest of "China."

In terms of water supply, only half of Kinshasa's population has direct access to drinkable water, and Masina Sans Fil forms no exception. Usually, four to five compounds have to share one water point, which REGIDESO does not install in a publicly accessible space but rather within someone's private compound, thereby occasioning a constant coming and going of children with buckets but also generating frequent quarrels as to the payment of the bill.

As for electricity, the very name of the neighborhood, Sans Fil (Wireless), proved to be ominous for the kind of unstable supply, or *délestage* that SNEL, Kinshasa's electricity company, became known for. *Délestage* is a good example of syncopated infrastructure. It means that electricity is switched off in one neighborhood during certain hours or days in order to feed other sectors in the city instead. The problem is that the rhythm of these cuts is totally unpredictable and apparently random: some areas receive electricity most of the time, most receive electricity some of the time (though at hours that vary every day and for a duration that is never the same), and some neighborhoods or even streets within a neighborhood do not receive any electricity for days, weeks, or even months. And then there are the numerous neighborhoods that are not even connected to the city's electricity network. All these varying rhythms of electricity supply in turn generate informal forms of networking or *branchement*, when people start to "bend" the lines toward their own compounds or start moving in search of light to read or write, in search of fuel to make one's generator work, or in search of a functioning plug to connect a laptop to or to recharge a cell phone.

The heart of all these interactions is situated around the Building, towering above the houses, shops, bars, cassava milling installations, and market stalls that came to invade the OCPT compound and its immediate surroundings. In sharp contrast with the "human" scale of most adjacent constructions (e.g., almost none has two levels), the Building dominates the whole neighborhood by its sheer size, as if, after all this time, this colonial architecture has remained an alien body in this postcolonial environment, a Gulliver surrounded by Lilliputians.

Yet although it has kept some of its modernist elegance, the Building did not escape the material degradation that has come to mark the rest of Sans Fil. And it is when one steps inside the Building that one realizes the full extent of this degradation.

When the land surrounding the Building started to be invaded in the 1980s, it was already clear that the Building itself was also going to succumb under the pressure. And indeed, although the industrial infrastructure of the site makes it totally unfit for any form of human habitation, OCPT allowed some of its employees to move in as a form of advance payment for their unpaid salaries or as a form of pension for some of its retiring employees. Numerous OCPT employees thus started to inhabit the site with their wives, kids, and other family members. They were quickly followed by the employees of the national radio and television broadcasting corporation (formerly Office Zaïrois de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision [OZRT], today Radio-Télévision Nationale Congolaise [RTNC]), located in another wing of the same building. Even though the equipment allowing them to work has long since disappeared, most of these people continue to be formally employed, although those I spoke to had not been paid for more than 150 months (or they had only been paid a tenth of their monthly salaries, not more than US$10–US$15 for most). When the first occupants moved into the Building, the infrastructure had already been badly damaged in the two waves of generalized looting and popular uprising that hit Kinshasa in 1991 and 1993 and that destroyed a major part of the city's and country's industrial and commercial infrastructure. The looters removed water pipes, electricity cables, elevator equipment, and a substantial part of the power turbines and the other electricity equipment. Other machines and motor parts were sold by corrupt OZRT officials during and after the lootings. Only the machinery too heavy to move or of no immediate practical use was left in the Building, and it constitutes a silent reminder of the site's more glorious past (fig. 2).

Today the Building is occupied by several families, totaling more than 300 people. In principle, access to and "ownership" of an "apartment" in the Building is arranged, supervised, and controlled by an agent of the OCPT who does not live

Figure 2. "Machine room." This part of the Building is located on ground level and is inhabited by seven families who each have constructed their own "house" inside this room. Photo used by permission of Sammy Baloji.

there himself but who holds office there every day. Known as the ADGA (Assistant of the Adjunct General Director; see fig. 3), he knows who has a right to the Building, and he manages conflicts and daily problems (and if necessary, he is also the one who will report problems to his OCPT superiors in the central district of Gombe). His authority, however, is limited. While some families arrived rather recently, some other families have now been living in the Building for so long that the "ownership" of the "legal" squats they occupy within the building has de facto been passed on to the next generation or that the children of the original occupants have already become parents themselves, so that several generations are now inhabiting this squatters' village together with a growing number of in-laws and other dependents. Some occupants also brought their own parents along. Other parts of the site are occupied by a number of single elderly people, mostly former OCPT employees, as well as by some young orphans of deceased OCPT employees. Its least occupied parts are intruded into at night by *shege* (street children) and other, even more unwanted guests such as members of Kinshasa's violent *kuluna* youth gangs.

Graffiti written on the walls by the Building's inhabitants to warn gang members not to trespass testify to the sense of insecurity that often reigns in the Building, especially at night: "*Kuluna*, watch out, we will catch you! We will know you in death" (Kuluna keba, tokokanga bino. Na liwa toyebi bino).[5]

Given the increasingly violent nature of street life in the Sans Fil neighborhood (that for a long time was spared the worst in terms of gang violence), the Building's inhabitants try to organize their own security even though (and maybe also because) the local police are stationed inside the Building. The Building also houses a bar, a restaurant, a cell phone repair shop, a Pentecostal church, and a local community radio station of Pentecostal signature, owned and exploited

5. That this warning is not just rhetorical was recently illustrated by an incident (March 2013) that took place in an adjacent street in Sans Fil, when boys from the neighborhood killed a *kuluna* intruder from a different neighborhood after the latter had attacked someone from Sans Fil. Thereupon friends of the deceased gang member launched a counterattack in the streets of Sans Fil. The word *kuluna* derives from the Lingala verb *kolona* (to plant, to sow, to cultivate), but it is also a derivative of the French *coloniser*. In addition, it refers to the military notion of *colonne* (or *coluna* in Portuguese, as the term was adopted by young Congolese diamond smugglers in Angola to describe their movement along the bush paths of Lunda Norte). In a city that does not otherwise give a full right of access to the urban public sphere, the young thus "militarily" occupy, appropriate, colonize, and reterritorialize the city.

Figure 3. Office of the Assistant of the Adjunct General Director. Photo used by permission of Sammy Baloji.

by some students, themselves children of the families living in the Building. All of these activities generate a constant coming and going of inhabitants and visitors, and this adds to what the inhabitants themselves describe as the Building's "promiscuity." The presence of all these bodies, hands, and feet also adds to the material strain the building undergoes. Without any sanitation blocks, toilets, running water, bathrooms, or kitchen areas, the overall hygienic condition inside the building is far from ideal. Many corners of the building strongly smell of urine, the elevator shafts are used as toilets, and the water that children have to carry upstairs to the different living quarters inside the building constantly seeps down to street level again via the broken pipes of a ruinous drainage system or via the stairs.

Poverty and the Anthropology of Infrastructure

It is often in local zones and domains within the city (such as the Building) or at the city's periphery (fields, gardens, cemeteries, markets, the street, the bar, the church)—with their myriad activities centering on the local production, marketing, and consumption of goods and services—that the city most fully illustrates its own complex production and generates the possibility of economic survival and of collective social life (on Kinshasa's everyday urban life, see also Simone 2010:129ff.). Here, the city reveals itself not as the product of careful planning or engineering but rather as the outcome of a randomly produced and occupied living space that belongs to whoever generates, grabs, and uses it. Of course, this occupation is always accompanied by (the threat of) expulsion. Because the urban residents often stand in no steady or lasting proprietary relationship to anything they own—scarcely even to the space they seize, occupy, and inhabit—unsteadiness, or movement, thereby becomes a form of property in and of itself. This random occupation of urban space almost always engenders conflicts with the urban authorities. Yet in spite of such conflicting interests and the uncertainties and the constant renegotiations that these clashes entail, it is this organic approach to the production of the city and its spaces that enables city dwellers to survive at all.

Partly as a result of this organic occupation of space, everyday lives in Africa's cities are to a large extent conceived around architectures that are defined by lack and absence on a material level. And many activities in the city become possible not because there is a well-developed infrastructure available to sustain them but because that infrastructure is not there or only exists through its degradation and its "absent presence." As in the Building, people's lives in large parts of the city unfold around truncated urban forms, fragments, and figments of imported urban technologies, echoes of built environments from the colonial period, and recycled levels of infrastructural ac-

commodation. Although such infrastructure might have originated as the product of a careful engineering of the urban space, it no longer functions along these lines today. Its functioning is, more often than not, punctuated by constant breakdown, by paucity, by failure, by recycling and repair. As such, urban residents are constantly confronted with infrastructural shortcomings and impossibilities, but, paradoxically, these in turn also generate new possibilities and opportunities, as well as different kinds of space, that are important to investigate and understand. The potholes or pools of water on the public road underneath the Building (fig. 4), to give but one example, may become infrastructural elements in themselves, because they create thickenings of publics and offer the possibility of assembling people or of slowing them down (so that one might sell something to them along the road).

In short, these vulnerable and often rather "invisible" infrastructures impose their own spatial and temporal logic onto the city. They close off many possibilities but also generate new social infrastructures, alternative spheres of social interaction, and different coping strategies and regimes of knowledge and power, which force us to look at city life differently and to question standard urban paradigms and prevailing notions of "slum" life and urban dystopia (see also Robinson 2010 on tropes of urban dystopia in Africa's cities).

Infrastructures, Politics, Publics, and Violence in the City

In recent years, even more than before, everyday urban life, with its shifting appropriations of public space, has taken on the dimension of an existential struggle for day-to-day survival. Simultaneously, Kinshasa is currently being reframed by neoliberal urban reform and development plans that radically relocate the right to the city.[6]

In Kinshasa, the implied teleological futurities of these urban reforms have a tendency to physically and conceptually obliterate the reality of local lives. Time and again, a number of common assumptions are evident in urban authorities' policy engagements, governance practices, and private investment frameworks. Above all, they are marked by a profound lack of attention to and a total disregard of the small-scale connections, negotiations, and decisions that people engage in on a daily basis in order to make a living and survive in the moment of the urban context.

A focus on infrastructure is therefore becoming increasingly "political": it is a means to reflect on the changing connotations of what constitutes the public sphere and the meaning of the categories of public (and private) and of diversity in the urban locale. In postcolonial contexts such as the DR Congo, the state does not hold the monopoly over the definition of these categories, nor does it constitute the sole core of power to orchestrate its contents. As the role of the AGDA within the Building illustrates, the state, in the realities of its everyday governance, constantly needs to negotiate its place to the same extent as all the other actors (Hagman and Péclard 2011). In such contexts, the lines that define the "public thing" remain blurred or are constantly given new meanings (in terms of the spaces, of the infrastructures, of the body politics, and of the specific conditions of the sort of modernities and informalities in which these categories are erected and transform their meaning).

The important issue of diversity in the city should first and foremost apply to this diverse notion of the public itself (and its association with political life). As already noted above, "class" has never been a strong marker to delineate publics and public spheres in Congolese urban life (notwithstanding the much heralded but often still largely illusory birth of a new African upper middle class). An urban context such as Kinshasa's does not consist of a single public sphere, one dominant ethical or normative space. Rather, it is made up of a much vaster realm of embodied everyday "co-presence" (Amin and Graham 1997:417–418), always already diversified through various different and often conflicting views on what collectivity, sociality, solidarity, collaboration, or the associational might mean on a very immediate daily basis. Various publics, from within and across various (often entangled) spaces, constantly offer a ground for questioning, recalling, bypassing, or resisting official definitions of the public "thing." This, it must be added, does not exclude a consensus with, a simultaneous adherence or conforming to, or a longing for the realization of the official definitions. For example, even though many in Kinshasa will never be able to live in new city projects such as Cité du Fleuve (fig. 5), it still inspires the feeling, even if only by distant association, of being able to participate in a better, more modern, and global urban future (De Boeck 2011).

At the same time, and rather paradoxically, the mobilization of diversity in these urban contexts is often played out in rather monolithic ways. One the one hand, urban life incessantly generates openings, divergences, possibilities, and lines of flight; but simultaneously, it constantly generates closures and exclusions on other levels through the creation of fake dichotomies, oppositions, and potential choices that are a pretense of diversity but in fact spring from an extremely limited number of options, generating an overwhelming sense of uniformity. As mentioned, this is true for the state itself as negotiated entity but also for the various publics in their attempts to constitute collectivities and groups and through them individual identities. One's membership in a certain collectivity or group might be less defined by class, but it certainly is defined, to a greater or lesser extent and at varying moments in time, by ethnic belonging, along regional or territorial lines, along generational or religious lines, or by belonging to a trading or smuggling network, a fan club, a rotational saving bank, a student club, and so on. According to the various needs or the relevance of the moment,

6. See De Boeck (2011) on one of Kinshasa's new urban extensions, the Cité du Fleuve project. On neoliberal urban planning across the global south more generally, see also Kaminer, Robles-Duran, and Sohn (2011), Künkel and Mayer (2012), Parnell and Pieterse (2014), Samara, He, and Chen (2013), and Watson 2013.

Figure 4. Market underneath the Building and adjacent road. Photo used by permission of Sammy Baloji.

each of these "belongings" might be strategically activated or go into "sleep" mode. Sometimes different memberships might be combined, but often the ethical spaces that each of these groups generate seem to exist as mutually exclusive: if one is a supporter of Vita Club (one of Kinshasa's famous football clubs), one cannot possibly make this known in a neighborhood where people support Vita's rival club, Motema Pembe (see also Simone 2010:141). One either listens to the music of Werrason or JB Mpiana, and it would be unthinkable to admit to liking both even though their music sounds rather similar. Similarly, if one uses Vodacom as one's mobile telephone provider rather than, say, Zain or Airtel, it makes one part of a specific constituency, a certain public (even though, for obvious reasons of connectivity and networking, one often needs several memberships and several *réseaux* [networks] simultaneously, and therefore one uses a phone with several SIM cards). But even so, here too a strong sense of uniformity generates the obligation to conform to your public, and often, while meeting someone for the first time, these are the exact questions that will be asked: which club are you a supporter of, whose music do you like, what kind of beer do you drink, which cell phone provider do you use? The answer to these questions determines the possibility of a longer relationship, places you within a specific moral or aesthetic universe, and offers the sense of being able to "know," "place," and "read" the person in question. But when scrutinized more closely, this "knowing" is often based on a (performative) pretense of difference. The more it is impossible to constitute the public or even imagine the possibility of the public, the more the pretense, the simulacrum of difference, takes over.

q7

This is also in part how the city produces its own specific forms of social violence. Even if Kinshasa has been a relatively nonviolent urban space throughout most of its existence (surprisingly, perhaps, given the harshness that marks life in this city on the material and social level, the formidable scale of the city, and the multiple imperfections of its administrative and policing structures), it is undeniable that there has been a sharp rise in extreme violence throughout the city, as the example of the *kuluna* gangs mentioned above attests. But most people's experience of quotidian violence is less spectacular. It is the violence of daily survival, produced by all, and directed most of the time against each other (rather than against the political and economical elites that exploit and abuse them). In fact, all the cleavages that run through the city (in terms of class, ethnic background, political adherence, generational rifts, etc.) are constantly overcome by a fracturing of the city's public space that generates a violence of proximity but that also manages to overcome that violence because of the same proximity (or "promiscuity" as the Building's inhab-

Figure 5. New houses under construction as part of the Cité du Fleuve project (Kingabwa, March 2013). Photo used by permission of Sammy Baloji.

itants call it). Kinshasa's public space is a conglomerate of multiple spaces that are constantly being "privatized" to various degrees and with varying success. Public space is constantly fractured and parceled out by a multiplicity of actors through intricate processes of seizing and capturing. Similarly, the actors themselves are constantly pushed to identify with a very specific group and public. A woman working in the market is not just a market woman, for example. In the beginning of this article I mentioned the *mama bitula*, the name given to a specific kind of market woman (namely the one who sells unsold goods off the market at reduced prices in the evening). This is a totally different category of market woman than the *mama benz*, for example, or the *mama manoeuvre*, the *mama bipupula*, the *mama trieuse*, the *mama mitelengano*, or the *bamama baboya toli*, not to mention the multiple different categories of specialization existing for men and children in and around the market.[7] The income and survival of each of these individual women and groups of women depends on sticking to their specificity and particular skill, hardening the lines of their professional identity and group, and staking their claim, marking their territory, standing their ground, because they all have to fight, among themselves first and then as a group against other groups of *mamas*, for their place on the market and for the same clients (who themselves most likely hold similar professional occupations). These demarcations, therefore, go hand in hand with lots of social violence, verbal abuse, and even physical aggression. "Everything is a fight" (*nionso ezali bitumba*), as a market woman told Kamba (2008): "To climb into a bus, a minibus, a taxi, to make some money, to eat, everything is vi-

7. The *mama manoeuvre* is a small-scale retailer who resells goods and food that she bought from important suppliers (referred to as *mamas benz*, from Mercedes-Benz, especially when they sell high-quality textiles). The *mama manoeuvre* divides everything she sells in as many small quantities as possible in order to make more profit. She does not specialize in one specific product. The term *mama bipupula*, on the other hand, is used to denote "scavenging" women who look for food scraps and pick up leftovers from the market in order to resell them at a much reduced price. The *mama bipupula* or *mama trieuse* is also hired by more powerful merchants to sieve flour or clean vegetables, for which service they will be paid with a small quantity of these items. The *mama mitelengano* (from the verb *-telengana*, to vagabond, to tramp, to meander) wanders about on the market looking for something edible or in search of a small job such as washing clothes, delivering food at home, helping buyers to discuss a good price with the seller, etc. The *bamama baboya toli* are successful market women who, thanks to the relative financial independence they enjoy and the social power that comes with it, refuse the authority of their husbands and claim a position as heads of their households. (For other occupational categories, see Dekossago and Namayele 2003–2004 and Kamba 2008:345–346).

olence. If you are not awake and vigilant, if you are too passive, you'll die before you know it and then they'll bury you. It's like the jungle. When you are weak, you are eaten by those who are stronger" (348).

As such, public space becomes the sum total of a multiplicity of narrowly defined identities and of small parcels that are temporarily and rather fleetingly owned by individuals and small, often ad hoc, collectivities. These constantly have to guard the boundaries of their temporary ownership of a little piece of space within the city's streets and markets and constantly have to negotiate their right to be there with a multitude of others: neighbors, passersby, street gangs, police, municipalities, and so on. All of these instances never enter into the game as institutional entities but as individual actors, as men and women, with whom (often very provisional and very temporary) bonds and relationships of trust, reciprocity, interest, and mutual gain might be established, and who all become each other's "field" (*elanga*), and therefore who also need each other, whether they like it or not.[8]

The absolute need to constantly renegotiate these links, the need, also, to inscribe oneself in as many networks as possible and engage in as many relationships as possible, offers a mechanism through which strangers and others are constantly being redefined in terms of relatedness, kinship, friendship, and autochthony (and possibly also vice versa). This constant lifting of the anomaly of anonymity also necessitates the ceaseless construction of a promiscuous public social life that takes place on a localized scale and by means of very physical proximity. Not that these conceptualizing manoeuvres of relatedness or the necessity of proximity and promiscuity do not pose problems or dangers (they are often more dangerous: e.g., witchcraft accusations are far more common among close kin than between strangers; see Ayimpam 2014; Geschiere 2013). But at least they offer the possibility of a performance of possible ad hoc sociabilities and convivialities. This performance is most often conditional or pro forma, and sometimes very short lived, but at least it gives an indication of the possibility of overcoming differences and generating temporary copresences or at least the intention thereof. That is why interpersonal conflicts and disputes (over money, about access to a field, or the "ownership" of a lover) are always played out in public. This "playing out" invariably takes place in very theatrical ways that always involve verbal and often even physical attacks, because it is this performance, the theatricality of the way in which the conflict is acted out, that draws a crowd and constitutes a public that will eventually but inevitably end up intervening and preventing the conflict from further escalation, at least momentarily. This even goes for witchcraft accusations: such an accusation has the potential to fracture a collectivity, but at the same time it also brings the conflict out into the open, and by making it public it offers possibilities for reassembling and for what Simone refers to as the "setting of the screen" for a possible public:

> For example, one striking aspect of everyday life in Kinshasa—that vast rambling almost ungovernable megacity of the Congo—is just how often strangers intervene into scenarios on the verge of getting out of hand and come up with the right sense of things in order to steer them in another direction. . . . But in contexts where the legitimacy of actions of all kinds can be incessantly contested, where people are always looking out for instances of self-aggrandizement and where veracity has long disappeared as an essential component of believability, the screen must always carry with it the traces of elsewheres—i.e. something inserted that is familiar, desired or reliable. Of course, the person who "sets the screen"—who "screens"—cannot be expected to be aware or in control of this. In this way the screen acts as a kind of "graft," an image of momentary integrity and completeness that comes from the outside but is capable of acting as if it had been inside of the scenario in question the whole time. An imposition can take place—a different way of keeping things moving, a change in the anticipated story line, where individuals feel variation in the way they experience they are in matters—but with the sense that everything is taking place in the same "neighbourhood," at the same time, in the same world. (Simone 2012:212)

The performative nature of public space is thus constantly marked by three interrelated processes. First, the "morcellation" or "informal" privatization of that space, that is, the erection of boundaries to mark a piece of that space as one's own, through acts of taking possession, of capture, and of seizure often made possible by infrastructural imperfections (see the pothole example above) and marked in tangible and material ways by shacks, fences, trees, and so on. Second, given the permeability of borders and the constant possibility, and even the right and the obligation, to interfere in other people's matters (even if that right will be instantly contested as well), there is the necessity to constantly guard one's propriety by relentlessly (re)negotiating these boundaries (which in and of themselves not only generate power and control, and thus income, but also the possibility of identity construction and of constituting a public of which one can be part). And thirdly, given the shaky nature of the proprietary reality of one's claims, there is the constant recourse to mobility, letting go, moving on, to perhaps return at the right time to repossess the place one had to relinquish.

Here the corporeal infrastructure becomes important, for the body is always with you, it is movable, and it is something that may be beaten but never stolen or taken away from you. The possibility and often necessity of physically moving away and coming back, of retreating, waiting (and exactly determining the time one needs to wait), and then returning to stake one's claim again, is crucial to understand the spatial and temporal politics of urban poverty and public space and the precise

8. A common expression in Kinshasa compares citizens to fields that soldiers (or "the state") harvest to "feed" themselves (*Civil azali elanga ya soda*; Kamba 2008:350).

ways in which these shape up in an urban environment such as Kinshasa's.

Conclusion

In these urban poverty worlds, in the end, diversity mutates into something else. While offering the possibility to constitute a collectivity and make a group, it also generates boundaries and differences that, by lack of a difference in content, and because of the interchangeability of publics, seem to be erected and played out along totally arbitrary lines that prevent different publics, that is, different groups of individuals, to constitute a general public (as the overarching totality of such groupings). The possibility of (a simulacrum of) the freedom to choose in an environment of poverty that does not otherwise offer many real choices and options is indicative of a constant tension between the public thing and its various publics. In any case, through these mechanisms the urban context continually generates fixity, conformity, and homogenizing uniformity (that is also very persistent in the monotony of the built environment itself, which is often marked by its strongly generic quality). Simultaneously, in doing so, it also generates incessant heterogeneity and dispersal.

On the one hand, then, the urban world is the space where (political) subjectivation takes place. It imposes a strong and dominant necessity to conform in order to socially and/or politically exist within the city (and it seems to be very successful in doing that: the possibility of an Arab Spring still seems very remote in Congo). But at the same time, this conformity is always double edged and always unravels in a disorderly, sometimes playful, but often also violent plurality that equally seems to be a necessary prerequisite in order to survive. The often fanatic adherence to arbitrary rules, laws, and legal frameworks in a lawless world, or at least in a world where laws always seem to shape-shift into something else; the longing to believe in absolute truths in a world where truth is volatile, arbitrary, easy to manipulate, and always multiple; the generation of a monolithic high moral ground in a world that often seems to be devoid of morality: all of this goes hand in hand with flow, flux, opening, excess, fragmentation, dissipation, difference, mobility, and multiplicity. The necessity of singularizing and thereby realizing oneself through becoming the member of an exclusive group is copresent with the impossibility of being exclusive: if exclusive membership in a group seems an absolute must to become visible and to socially exist in the urban site, this only works if, simultaneously, one has the capacity to inscribe oneself in as many groups and networks as possible, for it is this capacity to insert oneself, to belong and to belong together, that also constitutes the possibility to survive physically, socially, economically, and politically. This tension between singularization/exclusivity and the need to conform to and be part of as many collectivities as possible is constantly played out on all levels and constantly makes and undermines the public realm.

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